

# The Invention of the Jewish People

## A Review

[Ezra MacVie](#)

by Shlomo Sand, Verso, Brooklyn 2010 (second edition), 325 pp., with index

*"Behind every act in Israel's identity politics stretches, like a long black shadow, the idea of an eternal people and race."*—Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, p. 280

This book reports the history of a history. "History of history" is itself very much a developed field, but this book addresses the development and maintenance of that particular mnemohistory<sup>1</sup> upon which is founded today's state of Israel, as well as justification for that state's relegation of its non-Jewish "citizens" to its margins along with its conquest and perpetual occupation of the territories of countries that border on it. The aegis under which it grew up may be referred to as Zionism, but Zionism did not by itself impel the development and growth of Israel, nor may all those today favoring the interests of Israel be said to be Zionists.

The above should suffice to indicate that the forces and developments that author Shlomo Sand traces through the past 150 years or more are numerous and wildly varied, encompassing many a switch and switch-back through the times, places, and people he covers. His analysis is at every point both penetrating and subtle, but the conclusions it ineluctably leads to are utterly devastating to those who seek to advance the anti-history upon which is based the justifications for the Jewish ethnocracy that today bestrides the former Palestine.

In the course of documenting the development and servicing of Israel's national history, Sand uses a term I haven't previously noted, apparently somewhat of a synonym for Assmann's mnemohistory: mythistory, and he uses the term without attribution, although I find that it seems to have originated around 1986 in a book by William H. McNeill, then a historian at the University of Chicago. The word appeared in the title of McNeill's book, and Sand used it in the title of his third chapter. Perhaps the word is better established in Hebrew than in (my) English, at least among historians.



*Shlomo Sand in 2007.*

*By ורדה זנד (Transferred by Matanya/Originally uploaded by צחי לרנר) [Attribution], via Wikimedia Commons*

Sand necessarily debunks a number of iconic events in the popular perception of Jewish history, though such debunking is not Sand's actual purpose and he is in every instance at pains to point out that not only is he not the discoverer of the surprising truths he reveals, but further to claim that knowledge of the falsities is common, if not always publicly confessed, knowledge among historians. While he easily documents his not being the author of the disclosures with numerous specific and apposite citations, I did not note a single case of his "common knowledge" claims that was similarly buttressed. Possible reasons for this come to mind, including possibly the professional reluctance of historians to place their names in opposition to popular beliefs that in many cases constitute articles of religious faith.

The earliest "historical" icon to fall before Sand's scythe is the famed Exodus of the enslaved Jews from Egypt, neither at the time supposed, nor at any other time, neither all at once like the legend, nor even gradually, to any great extent. Those exposing this fable (again, Sand emphatically eschews any credit for the exposé) rely heavily on both progress in archaeology and at the philological level (the science of decoding ancient languages) that has been made more or less continually since the late Nineteenth Century. Sand is an Exodus Denier—it never happened, he says, and he cites the proof, abundant as the proof that something did *not* happen must always be. It was at the end of this Exodus that the Jews took possession of the land that today supporters of Israel say God gave them, so the Exodus is one of the three legs of the stool upon which is balanced the argument that there must be a Jewish state in the Middle East.

The next major icon (many lesser ones are swept aside along the way) to fall is that of the Diaspora. Again, the proof adduced here is of something *not* happening, and it is abundant indeed. Sand notes the conclusion among historians that most of the people of ancient Judea, Jews and otherwise, stayed where they were, while parties of missionaries and other religious notables occasionally departed the area and set up shop in distant places such as today's Spain, Morocco, Iran, and Ukraine. This second leg of the Israeli hegemonic claim advances the view that, since "all" the Jews left Judea in the First and Second Centuries A.D., those found living there today are not of Jewish descent. They came from somewhere else. Sand is a Diaspora Denier.

The last leg of the stool is knocked out when Sand presents the extensive evidence that today's Jewry around the globe are not of common descent—not from the intrepid band that never wandered forty years in the desert seeking the Promised Land, nor from any other single cohort of ancestors. This particular disillusionment is attained—again, not by Sand, but by archaeologists, philologists and geneticists whose work Sand abundantly references—primarily through disclosure that, before it was eclipsed in most places by Christianity or Islam, Judaism was a proselytizing religion very much on the lines of its just-named successors. Sand adduces persuasively massive conversions of populations having no biological relationship to the original cadre of former slaves chosen by God himself on that day long, long ago to inherit the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. At the time Sand was writing, genetic studies that he cites were oscillating violently among conclusions supporting, failing to support, and supporting in most-peculiar ways the legend so necessary to the entitlements claimed by Israel, that substantially all Jews are to at least some extent descended from the recipients of the Divine Land Grant. And apropos of this thrashing back and forth of conclusions of genetic studies, which

continues to the present day, Sand cites a particularly fascinating and profoundly significant line of inquiry pursued from at least 2005 by Greek medical researcher J. P. Ioannidis, in which he proves the title of his landmark article, “[...] Most Published Research Findings Are False.” While Ioannidis’s examples are in many cases drawn from the field of inference from genetics, it does not appear that he investigates any that underlie national mythologies. He confines himself to studies linking genes to diseases or other maladies. But the pertinence of the dynamics Ioannidis describes in case after case apply to Israel’s genetic mythology so directly that Sand leaves the entire matter to a mere footnote.

Shlomo Sand is a professor of history at Tel Aviv University. Though he does not advertise his origins as such, his 1946 birth in a displaced-persons camp in Linz, Austria identifies him as in some ways, like the country he lives in, a child of the Holocaust. While his book gives virtually no actual attention to the place of the Holocaust in his country’s mnemohistory, the three asides I counted in his book making reference to the concept (and to those who might “deny” it) all solidly express horror and indignation at what it constituted in terms of Jewish experience, and German guilt. Make no mistake: Shlomo Sand is a historical revisionist non pariel. That he appears to have exempted Holocaustography from the scope of his revisionism could be tactical, to enable him to cling to at least tatters of his much-assailed Jewish loyalty for purposes of advancing those viewpoints in which he truly is expert, or (and this does not preclude the tactic just mentioned) it might be mere logistics, in which he economizes on his energies and knowledge in order to focus on a single goal. In this, whatever the forces or sympathies informing him, he resembles Norman Finkelstein, that heroic chronicler of abuses committed under cover of the atrocities embodied in the Holocaust narrative. Like Finkelstein, Sand assiduously abjures the slightest hint of attack upon the scripture of the Holocaust, leaving it in the capable hands of many contributors to *Inconvenient History* and a few—very few—other such journals.

Sand’s work is far beyond magisterial in both its scope and its depth, and yet it accomplishes its work in a mere 325 pages (including an Afterword). Even more to be marveled at, its text varies for most of its length between interesting and outright gripping. For this, much if not most of the credit must be given to its late (2009) translator, Yael Lotan, herself a noted dissenter in Israel against that country’s repugnant, if not suicidal, belligerence against its neighbors and predecessors on its territory. Lotan’s translation of Sand’s original Hebrew manuscript simply takes my breath away. It is far and away the best translated material I can recall ever having read, attendant to which judgment I must confess that I do not read Hebrew, so I could not actually evaluate the translation per se.

As to Sand’s Hebrew original, that book (*Matai ve’ekh humtza ha’am hayehudi? When and How Was the Jewish People Invented?*) was on Israel’s bestseller lists for nineteen weeks. The book has 551 footnotes, virtually every one of which gives a citation. The sources cited are in English, French, and other European languages, but as might be expected of a scholar of this subject, writing in the place and time in which he wrote, the majority are in Hebrew. To deal with this near-insuperable language barrier, he and/or his translator settled on the following treatment: the author, title, publisher and place of publication are rendered in English, and the citation concluded with the notation “(in Hebrew).” The frequency of this pattern’s appearance starkly discloses the extent to which Sand (and his translator Yael Lotan) are unlocking to the English-speaking world “secrets” that might otherwise remain enshrouded in Hebrew’s curvaceous graphology, forever unknown outside the Pale of Chosenness.

To continue with the matter of this book’s “author-in-English,” I note that she died with unexpected suddenness (in Israel) of “liver cancer” at Age 78 immediately after her monumental work was published

in the United States. In common, perhaps, with historical revisionists generally, I am susceptible to “conspiracy theories,” particularly those (and there are many) that I have hatched myself. About all I can note further in the matter is that in the socialist paradise of Israel, every doctor is an employee of the state—including, obviously, Lotan’s doctor and/or doctors. So much for paranoia—and for socialized medicine, at that. I rate the genius of Lotan’s final opus as fully equal to that of the work (Sand’s) upon which she bestowed what must have been among her last exertions. I say this as a person who has spent of his own paltry abilities upon translation, and who has been found, in that balance, to be sadly wanting.

Back to the original genius, Sand, who lives in and bravely walks the streets of Israel today. He has, since the publication of the subject book, written another book, whose title rather suggests something of a series with the present work, *The Invention of the Land of Israel*. For the English translation, he has, obviously, a new translator, a young one, who remains alive as of this writing, whose work I have not sampled (unless he translated the Afterword of the present work, which is dated after Lotan’s death).

Mnemohistory is perhaps the main source of that perversion of “history” that produces the requirement for revisionism (the stimulation and maintenance of war fever is a close competitor). Within, as it were, the belly of the beast itself, Shlomo Sand has made himself indelibly—no matter what happens to him tomorrow—an immortal champion of such revisionism.

Even those (few) with no interest in the phenomenon of Israel, nor any in the tensions “in the Middle East” that may be traced to its existence and policies will still find the feats attained by this man’s scholarship and indefatigable devotion to truth not just astounding, but outright inspiring as to the potential for justice to spring from the only source from which such a thing could spring—the heart of man.

I dedicate this trivial review to the memory of Yael Lotan, and to the grace of God for all those who would help us surmount the barriers of language, prejudice, race, and memory among our kind—the kind we know as Human.

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## Notes:

- [\[1\]](#) Mnemohistory is a term introduced by German Egyptologist Jan Assmann to signify those transmogrifications of factual history that are concocted and then imposed upon the populaces of countries, religions and other organizations for purposes of unifying and harnessing opinions and motivations among such populaces. It could be termed “afactual collective memory.”

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